

## WOMEN AND WAR: DECONSTRUCTING THE NOTION OF VICTIMS AND RECONSTRUCTING THEIR ROLE AS PEACE BUILDERS

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**Book title:** *Mujeres y guerra. Deconstruyendo la noción de víctimas y reconstruyendo su papel de constructoras de la paz*

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Ever since the *Iliad*, women at war have been displayed mostly in various passive roles: whether the cause of fighting –the fair Helen– or victims of its aftermath –the weeping mothers and widows– women remained at the periphery of war, which has been typically a patriarchal enterprise. Sanctioned by centuries of religious and secular literature, from Egyptian hieroglyphics and reliefs to Sun-Tzu or von Clausewitz, the relationships between women and war allocated those two functions: women are either identified as ominous origin of conflict and imbalance (*causa efficiens*), or the ultimate receptors (*causa finalis*) of war. Of course, that imagery had to be deconstructed just like it had been erected: not just by narrative means but also as whole social construct, and so that is the aim of Fatuma Ahmed Ali in her *Mujeres y guerra* (Women and war).

Starting from those traditional roles of women as either perpetrators or victims of war, Ali dismantles that stereotypical –essentialist– perspective by pointing out the multiplicity of roles displayed by women in armed conflicts. The scrutiny of those roles

renders two major outputs: first, most of the available roles designated to women have been characteristically negative ones; secondly the conciliatory skills of women as peace builders are hardly –if at all– featured throughout History. Therefore, Ali's quest is that in search of active or positive roles of women in armed conflicts as the first step to reconstruct their peace (positive) builders (active) role, from the innovative attitude of women in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* in the Greek classical era to the Women's Peace Party funded during the First World War or the Madres de la plaza de Mayo movement against the military dictatorship in Argentina (1976-1983).

Ali's historical analysis is divided into three stages: Pre-Colonial, Colonial and Post-Colonial in Africa; to each of those three stages corresponds a women's role in African wars, mere objects for the first period, women as temporal active subjects during the independence struggle, only to regain an objectified role, now reshaped, in the current stage. In this last period, the Post-Colonial era, children and women become new actors of war, but also other new consequences emerge such as the Gender Based Violence (GBV) and most importantly the women as peace builders. As example of these roles gained during the Post-Colonial era, Ali mentions cases such as the mass rape in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) that has made women's body the battlefield itself: unlike men, the role of women is not restricted to agents (whether active or passive) of war, but as shown by DRC, women's body can also be the locus of war; or high technology war which has blighted women's contributions even further. Furthermore, just like it happens with war, the contribution of women to resilience and stability through civil society, NGOs, and political activism remains equally opaque.

Ali's proposal of women's role as peace builders is not just a performative function, but a true epistemological turn operated from a feminist approach, that questions the traditional androcentric discourse where war is ultimately derived out of the prototypical masculine violence. At the same time this criticism reviews essentialist approaches to feminism mostly from a postmodern viewpoint where gender no longer is a compartmented system of categorization with its attached roles, but rather a fluid continuum. Once the references are established, the first operation is to dissolve the social construction of women in war contexts: the warrior's comfort, fighters, educators or victims –all of them are discourses

and practices projected from a patriarchal angle; but women not only give birth, raise warriors or heal wounds, they can also take lives away, as evidenced by numerous examples of combatants, whether voluntarily (as in nowadays career oriented armies in countries such as USA or Spain) or forced (the cases of girls soldiers in Sierra Leone, Colombia or Mozambique). Indeed that is the second movement showcasing samples of women as perpetrators that could act as counterexamples to the stereotypical roles within the patriarchal frame of reference. Of particular interest here is the case of Alice Lakwena, who was not only the Joseph Kony's mentor, but the maternal source of the complicated amalgam of mysticism, revolutionary militia, sheer cruelty and family bond that made the Ugandan Lord's Resistance Army one of the most unique African movements. The third step takes women's contribution to peace beyond the traditional constructions (women as peaceful, more connected to nature) towards dynamic examples such as pacifist movements, activism, mobilization strategies and involvement into peace processes at all levels, from interpersonal mediation to legislation. The final and conclusive movement is the deconstruction of women as perpetrators or victims of war and the reconstruction of their role as peace builders.

Through the eccentric but sound scholarly strategy of placing not men but women at the centre of war dynamics, Fatuma Ali's *Mujeres y guerra* is a prime example of how academic research can reshape social reality by altering our understanding not only of the women/men dichotomy but also the peace/war nexus.